

Deakin University

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Yellow-tailed black cockatoos

Biographical note:

Dr. Antonia Pont is Senior Lecturer at Deakin University, in the role of Course Director for the Bachelor of Creative Writing, as well as the current Chair of the Australasian Association for Writing Programs (AAWP). She publishes poetry, essays, shorter and longer fiction, and scholarly prose. Her research focuses on the relation of practising to habitual ways of being – or to being-as-habit – and on possibilities for change and newness given more precise theorisations of the former. In 2017, she published the co-authored *Practising with Deleuze* with Edinburgh University Press.

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Creative writing – non-humans – climate change – plural first-person point of view – practising – perceptual habit

Went a second night to see them.

If we turn right out of the driveway here, we find ourselves on a long straight road – McBurnie & Boags – which cuts into the nose of land on which we’re holidaying. South Gippsland. Of corrugated gravel, it’s lined with a mixture of what seem to be old Banksias, very established introduced pines (those with fine needles and almost-black trunks) and others that, in my ignorance, I can’t identify. On one side are huge open paddocks for livestock, with boxy grey-metal feeding bins. The cattle (my later guess will be Polled Herefords and Angus) are nowhere to be seen, gathered probably in a corner further up near our drive. Their absence makes the solder-coloured bins look abandoned or obsolete.

On the other side of the road is further grazing land, but with more trees and an unevenness to the ground. It recalls the way land looks near rivers, but there are no rivers nearby to my knowledge. Our first night here we took an after-dinner stroll facing into the setting sun. Its orange ball slid visibly into the land’s dark edge, revealing the speed of how our planet moves. We walked, huddled to the right of the road, avoiding the worst of the glare.

We passed a blue roadside mailbox, like the ones from my remote rural childhood. Fat milk pail on its side, large enough for packages, for newspapers, and for keeping deliveries safe from (unlikely, prayed-for) rain. This farm boasted a smeary sign that declared it a ‘natural producer’, probably of beef, hence the cattle in the paddocks over the road.

We seemed to walk a long way, having been trapped – four hours or so – in a car that day, and after a mad morning (and prior evening) of doing those tasks which people in a profession have to do before leaving town for leisure. Our bodies were pleased by the steady strolling, even as we worked to avoid tripping on the road’s corrugations. It was like walking into and against a dark cushion of brilliance.

Kilometres away, the gargantuan, feather-white arms of the wind turbines – a rare sight in this country – were churning the milkish dusk sky. The thought of them, soft and stirring the air in faithful cadence, set off a surge of relief. It was a rush of hope that threaded me, as if back together, in places I hadn’t realised had come apart.

And so it was that we saw a flock of fanned black tails in flight across the sky with their distinctive wing-beat and “weird” (as Pizzey and Doyle’s *Field Guide to Birds of Australia*, 1980, describes it) call. They move more slowly than one imagines aerodynamics coupled with gravity would allow. Deep, slow muscular beats, but light too. It’s as if the movement should make more sound than it does, as if they’re built in a mysterious way and can work less to remain airborne.

they pass across
pastel, stretched-Lycra sky
– in any case, black then
silhouetted again
conveniently pausing
to show
in flashcard profile expert wings

at various coordinates on
their nitrogen oxygen argon carbon
dioxide sine-wave ride

They were using the tree just beside where we'd stopped for their dusk conference of bingeing on the Banksia pods. One – high up and determined – was going at a seed capsule and tipping the yellow wheel of its cheek towards us, in an every-so-often way and inclining an eye (perhaps) to deign a glance at the earth-bound aliens. Me in loud white sweater and louder pants (covered in images of birds); you in black and navy, sun-glassed.

They cried out a lot, rearranging themselves among the boughs, constantly swooping away and back and far out over the bare paddocks beyond the road and returning again, and maybe (but not really) disturbing the crows, who were crouched there in the stark open, playing ad hoc parliaments. It was the hour of birds. And the Yellow-tailed ones the wildest.

surfing their sunset arcs
of indecision or just the luxury
of bounty: *which one?*
or (probably) *next! next! next!*

Then last night, again – our second visit, now intentional – they arrived punctually, as we did. The sun, a different disk, was still close and hot enough. They preferred this time the high branches back off the road, away from us. Avoidant, sure, they were difficult to see among the backlit foliage. In silent consensus, we risked the tiger-snake grass and pressed the parallel lines of the wire fence lower to gain access.

Passing beneath the enormous tree – densely, blackly populated high up but with mirthful bodies camouflaged – was treacherous. They drop-hurled very heavy pods down, in thick loud, belligerent thuds. These crashed all around our heads – randomly, unrhymed – while the birds ate and screeled and surveilled our impertinent voyeurism. Unsettled, or excited by the nightly society, who could tell. We avoided, in the end, injurious impact, and snakes weren't around.

Their irreverence at altitude and our terrestrial bumbling: stupendously comedic.

Research statement

Research background

To interrupt the habit of imagining humans as central is not new. Derrida (2002), Harraway (2008), along with writers, such as Hornung (2016 [2008]) and Spahr (2005) are examples of efforts to displace assumptions insisting on humanity's ontological primacy. If not a place for strictly ontological or scientific debate, creative writing can be a valid site for practising other kinds of emphases, for generativity *per se*, and even for *failing-but-persisting* at such creative displacements.

Research significance

The work experiments with unfamiliar positioning of its human and avian protagonists – on colonised land, with Indigenous and introduced flora species in close proximity. Recounting two encounters – one accidental, the other sought out – between homosapiens and a local species, the birds' flights are depicted as if mathematically, their physicality lightly echoed in a redemptive human invention (wind farms). Blurring first-person plural, the piece dilutes the gravitas of human visitors, according humorous and astute agency to the birds. A stilted rendering of the human narrative voice seeks to contrast with the birds as fluently communicative, curious and a little dangerous.

Research contribution

Sitting within life-writing, this work arguably offers a space to practise complications of anthropocentric habits. This encounter with a native species was a welcome event – perhaps one enabled by the space and time of *scholé*. The latter invokes free time used for leisure but also for *disputation* with oneself, with one's habits of perceiving and ordering the lived world.

Works cited

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